

Seven ways to improve your conversations

Improve your communication skills /
Alan Barker. -- 2nd ed. page 24 to 43

seven proven strategies to help you improve your conversations

- 1. **Clarify your objective.**
- 2. Structure your thinking.
- 3. Manage your time.
- 4. Find common ground.
- 5. Move beyond argument.
- 6. Summarise often.
- 7. Use visuals.

Clarify your objective

- *Give a headline.*
 - If you know what your main point is, state it at the start of the conversation. That way, the other person is better prepared to make sense of everything else.



Clarify your objective

- **Headlines**

- Newspapers rely on headlines to get the story's message across quickly.
- You can do the same in your conversations:

- I want to talk to you about...
- I've looked at the plan and I've got some suggestions.
- I know you're worried about the sales figures. I've got some clues that might help.
- I've called this meeting to make a decision about project X.



Clarify your objective

- Objectives roughly divide into two categories:
 - Exploring a problem;



- Finding a solution.



Clarify your objective

- When you are thinking about your headline, ask ‘problem or solution?’ Being able to distinguish between these two kinds of objective is a vital conversational skill.
- You may tend to assume that any conversation about a problem is aiming to find a solution – particularly if the other person has started the conversation.
- As a result, you may find yourself working towards a solution without accurately defining or understanding the problem.
- It may be that the other person doesn’t want you to offer a solution, but rather to talk through the problem with them.

Clarify your objective

- Ex.
 - Write down the objectives of one of the conversations that you made yesterday

Clarify your objective

- Ex.
 - Even think in a broader way:
 - After my death, I'd like people to say the following about me.
 - In priority order, my top 10 values are:
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - .
 - .
 - 10

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Structure your thinking

- The simplest way to structure a conversation is to break it in half.



Structure your thinking

- *First-stage thinking* is thinking about a problem;
- *second-stage thinking* is thinking about a solution.
- Why people ignore first stage thinking
 - Perhaps because problems are frightening.
 - To stay with a problem – to explore it, to try to understand it further, to confront it and live with it for a few moments – is too uncomfortable.



Structure your thinking

- People don't like living with unresolved problems. Better to deal with it: sort it out; solve it; get rid of it.
- Resist the temptation to rush into second-stage thinking.
- Give the first stage – the problem stage – as much attention and time as you think appropriate. Then give it a little more.
- And make sure that you are both in the same stage of the conversation at the same time.

Structure your thinking

- Skilled conversation holders can steer the conversation by linking the following:
 - The past and the present;
 - The problem and the solution;
 - First-stage and second-stage thinking;
 - Requests and answers;
 - Negative ideas and positive ideas;
 - Opinions about what is true, with speculation about the consequences.

Structure your thinking

- Simple four-stage model of conversation (**WASP: welcome; acquire; supply; part**)
- **Welcome (first-stage thinking)**. At the start of the conversation, state your objectives, set the scene and establish your relationship: ‘Why are we talking about this matter? Why *us*?’

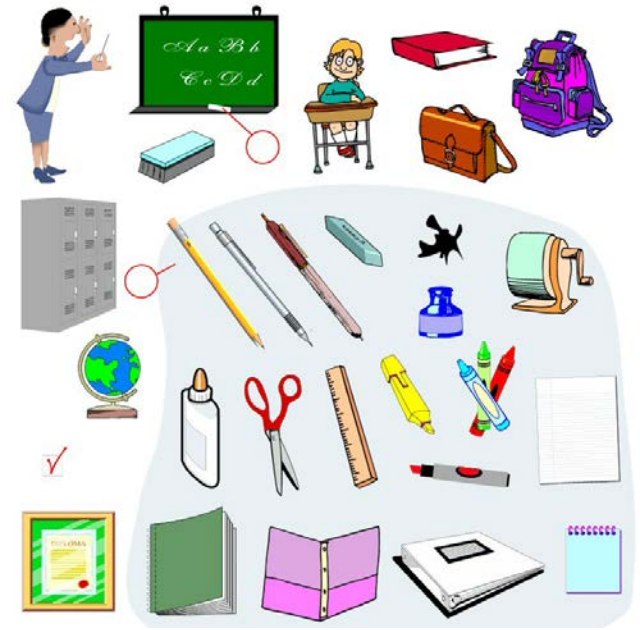


Structure your thinking

- **Acquire (first-stage thinking).**
 - The second step is information gathering. Concentrate on finding out as much as possible about the matter, from as many angles as you can.
 - For both of you, listening is vital. You are acquiring knowledge from each other.
 - This part of the conversation should be dominated by questions.

Structure your thinking

- **Supply (second-stage thinking).**
Now, at the third step, we summarize what we've learnt and begin to work out what to do with the information.
- We are beginning to think about how we might move forward: the options that present themselves.
- It's important at this stage of the conversation to remind yourselves of the objective that you set at the start.



Structure your thinking

- **Part (second-stage thinking).**
 - Finally, you work out what you have agreed.
 - You state explicitly the conversation's outcome: the action that will result from it.
 - The essence of the parting stage is that you explicitly agree what is going to happen next. What is going to happen? Who will do it? Is there a deadline? Who is going to check on progress?

Structure your thinking

- Ex.
- Take the previous points in mind to restructure a conversation that aims to provide solutions to quality of learning at our university

• احمد زنون

• حسام بدير

• يمنى الدمرداش

• ناريمان فايز

Structure your thinking

- **A similar four stage model for conversation**
 - relationship;
 - possibility;
 - opportunity;
 - action.

Structure your thinking

- **A conversation for relationship ('welcome')**
 - You hold a conversation for relationship to create or develop the relationship you need to achieve your objective. It is an exploration.
- **A conversation for relationship: key questions**
 - Who are we?
 - How do we relate to the matter in hand?
 - What links us?
 - How do we see things?
 - What do you see that I can't see?
 - What do I see that you don't see?
 - In what ways do we see things similarly, or differently?
 - How can we understand each other?
 - Where do we stand?
 - Can we stand together?

Structure your thinking

- Ex.
 - Develop a conversation for a relationship with some one that you meet for the first time at the class using the previous model
- Think of those tricky conversations you have had with strangers in public places

Structure your thinking

- **A conversation for possibility ('acquire')**
 - A conversation for possibility is *not* about whether to do something, or what to do. It seeks to find new ways of looking at the problem. There are a number of ways of doing this:
 - Look at it from a new angle.
 - Ask for different interpretations of what's happening.
 - Try to distinguish what you're looking at from what you think about it.
 - Ask how other people might see it.
 - Break the problem into parts.
 - Isolate one part of the problem and look at it in detail.
 - Connect the problem into a wider network of ideas.
 - Ask what the problem is like. What does it look like, or feel like?

Structure your thinking

A conversation for possibility: key questions

What's the problem?

What are we trying to do?

What's the real problem?

What are we really trying to do?

Is this a problem?

How could we look at this from a different angle?

Can we interpret this differently?

How could we do this?

What does it look like from another person's point of view?

What makes this different from last time?

Have we ever done anything like this before?

Can we make this simpler?

Can we look at this in bits?

What is this like?

What does this feel or look like?

Structure your thinking

- Manage this conversation with care.
- Make it clear that this is not decision time.
- Encourage the other person to give you ideas.
- Take care not to judge or criticize.
- Do challenge or probe what the other person says.
- Manage the emotional content of this conversation with care.
- Acknowledge people's feelings and look for the evidence that supports them.

Structure your thinking

- Ex.
 - Use the acquire questions to find out why our city is not clean.

Structure your thinking

- A conversation for opportunity ('supply')
 - A conversation for opportunity takes us into second-stage thinking.
 - This is fundamentally a conversation about planning.
 - Many good ideas never become reality because people don't map out paths of opportunity.
 - A conversation for opportunity is designed to construct such a path. You are choosing what to do.
 - You assess what you would need to make action possible:
 - resources, support and skills.
 - This conversation is more focused than a conversation for possibility: in choosing from among a number of possibilities, you are finding a sense of common purpose.

Structure your thinking

A conversation for opportunity: key questions

Where can we act?

What could we do?

Which possibilities do we build on?

Which possibilities are feasible?

What target do we set ourselves?

Where are the potential obstacles?

How will we know that we've succeeded?

Structure your thinking

- The bridge from possibility to opportunity is *measurement*. This is where you begin to set targets, milestones, obstacles, measures of success. How will you be able to judge when you have achieved an objective?

Structure your thinking

- Recall your original objective. Has it changed?
- Conversations for opportunity can become more exciting by placing yourselves in a future where you have achieved your objective.
- What does such a future look and feel like? What is happening in this future?
- How can you plan your way towards it? Most people plan by starting from where they are and extrapolate current actions towards a desired objective. By 'backward planning' from an imagined future, you can find new opportunities for action.

Structure your thinking

- Ex.
 - Structure your thinking in a family conversation to take the opportunity of traveling in the summer vacation.

Structure your thinking

- **A conversation for action ('part')**
 - This is where you agree what to do, who will do it and when it will happen. Translating opportunity into action needs more than agreement; you need to generate a promise, a commitment to act.

Structure your thinking

A conversation for action: key stages

A conversation for action is a dynamic between asking and promising. It takes a specific form:

- You ask the other person to do something by a certain time. Make it clear that this is a request, not an order. Orders may get immediate results, but they rarely generate commitment.
- The other person has four possible answers to this request:
 - They can accept.
 - They can decline.
 - They may commit to accepting or declining at a later date ('I'll let you know by x').
 - They can make a counter-offer ('I can't do that, but I can do x').
- The conversation results in a promise ('I will do x for you by time y').

Structure your thinking

- Some of your conversations will include all four stages; some will concentrate on one more than another.
- These conversations will only be truly effective if you hold them *in order*
- The success of each conversation depends on the success of the conversation before it.

Structure your thinking

- Ex
- Suppose that you decided with a group of friends to make your street a better place to live in:
 - Organize your conversation according to the previous model to achieve your goal

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Manage your time

- Remember: ***Time is a nonrenewable resource***

Manage your time

- **Managing time for the conversation**
 - Don't just assume that there is no time.
 - Be realistic.
 - If necessary, make an appointment at another time to hold the conversation.
 - Make sure it's a time that both of you find convenient.

Manage your time

- **Managing time in the conversation**
 - You know that a conversation is going too fast when people interrupt each other a lot, when parallel conversations start, when people stop listening to each other.

Manage your time

- Conversations can go too fast because:
 - we become solution-oriented;
 - feelings take over;
 - we start to ‘groupthink’ (everybody starts thinking alike to reinforce the group);
 - we’re enjoying ourselves too much;
 - assumptions go unchallenged;
 - people stop asking questions;
 - arguments flare up.

Manage your time

- Conversely, you know that a conversation is slowing down:
 - when one person starts to dominate the conversation,
 - When questions dry up,
 - when people pause a lot,
 - when the energy level in the conversation starts to drop or
 - when people show signs of weariness.

Manage your time

Conversations start to slow down because:

- the conversation becomes problem-centred;
- too much analysis is going on;
- people talk more about the past than the future;
- more and more questions are asked;
- people start to repeat themselves;
- the conversation wanders;
- people hesitate before saying anything.

Manage your time

- Tactics to help you regain control of time in your conversations.
 - If you feel that the conversation is speeding up, try the following:
 - Reflect what the other person says rather than replying directly to it.
 - Summarise their remark before moving on to your own.
 - Ask open questions (questions that can't be answered by 'yes' or 'no').

Manage your time

- If you feel that the conversation is slowing down try the following:
 - Push for action: ‘What shall we *do*?’ ‘What do you propose doing?’
 - Signal that you are looking for action, not words.
 - Summarize and link the points of the conversation together, so that you can bring one stage of thinking to a conclusion and move on to the next.
 - Look for the implications of what the other person is saying: ‘What does that mean in terms of...?’ ‘How does this affect our plans?’ ‘So what action is possible here?’
 - Ask for new ideas and offer some new ones of your own.

Manage your time

- Ex.
 - Remember a conversation that took too long compared to its outcomes
 - Suggest simple phrases that you can use to slow down a fast conversation

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Find common ground.

- Notice how you ask for, and give, permission for these moves to happen. If you are asking permission to move into new territory, you might:
 - make a remark hesitantly;
 - express yourself with lots of hesitant padding: ‘perhaps we might...’, ‘I suppose I think...’, ‘It’s possible that...’;
 - pause before speaking;
 - look away or down a lot;
 - explicitly ask permission: ‘Do you mind if I mention...?’ ‘May I speak freely about...?’.

Find common ground.

- You do not proceed until the other person has given their permission.
- Such permission may be explicit:
 - ‘Please say what you like’;
 - ‘I would really welcome your honest opinion’;
 - ‘I don’t mind you talking about that’.
- Other signs of permission might be in the person’s body language or behaviour:
 - nodding,
 - smiling,
 - leaning forward.

Find common ground.

- Conversely, refusing permission can be explicit –
- ‘I’d rather we didn’t talk about this’ – or in code.
- The person may
 - evade your question,
 - wrap up an answer in clouds of mystification or
 - reply with another question.
- Their non-verbal behaviour is more likely to give you a hint of their real feelings:
 - folding their arms,
 - sitting back in the chair,
 - becoming restless,
 - evading eye contact.

Find common ground.

- Ex
 - Remember a time when you entered some one territory and neglecting his denial
 - List denial and acceptance non verbal moves other than the ones listed before

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Move beyond argument.

- Conversations have a habit of becoming *confrontational*. Instead of searching out the common ground
- People hold their own corner and treat every move by the other person as an attack.
- Confrontational conversations set up a boxing match between competing opinions.

Move beyond argument.

- Opinions are ideas gone cold. They are assumptions about what should be true, rather than conclusions about what is true in specific circumstances. Opinions might include:
 - stories (about what happened, what may have happened, why it happened);
 - explanations (of why something went wrong, why it failed);
 - justifications for doing what was done;
 - generalisations (to save the bother of thinking);
 - wrong-making (to establish power over the other person).

Move beyond argument.

- Adversarial conversation stops the truth from emerging.
- Arguing actually stops you exploring and discovering ideas.
- And the quality of the conversation rapidly worsens: people are too busy defending themselves, too frightened and too battle fatigued to do any better.

Move beyond argument.

- **The Ladder of Inference**

- The Ladder of Inference is a powerful model that helps you move beyond argument.
- He pictures the way people think in conversations as a ladder. At the bottom of the ladder is observation; at the top, action.

Move beyond argument.

- The ladder inference
 - From your observation, you step on to the first rung of the ladder by selecting *data*. (You choose what to look at.)
 - On the second rung, you infer *meaning* from your experience of similar data.
 - On the third rung, you generalise those meanings into *assumptions*.
 - On the fourth rung, you construct mental models (or *beliefs*) out of those assumptions.
 - You act on the basis of your mental models.

Move beyond argument.

- The ladder inference
 - it allows you to defuse an adversarial conversation by ‘climbing down’ from private beliefs, assumptions and opinions, and then ‘climbing up’ to shared meanings and beliefs.

Move beyond argument.

- For example, if someone suggests a particular course of action, you can carefully climb down the ladder by asking:
 - ‘Why do you think this might work?’ ‘What makes this a good plan?’
 - ‘What assumptions do you think you might be making?’
 - ‘Have you considered...?’
 - ‘How would this affect...?’ ‘Does this mean that...?’
 - ‘Can you give me an example?’ ‘What led you to look at this in particular?’

Move beyond argument.

- If you are suggesting a plan of action, you can ask:
 - ‘Can you see any flaws in my thinking?’
 - ‘Would you look at this stuff differently?’ ‘How would you put this together?’
 - ‘Would this look different in different circumstances?’ ‘Are my assumptions valid?’
 - ‘Have I missed anything?’

Move beyond argument.

- Ex
 - We need two volunteers to discuss who should win the national league competition

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Summarize often

- Perhaps the most important of all the skills of conversation is the skill of summarizing.

Summaries:

- allow you to state your objective, return to it and check that you have achieved it;
- help you to structure your thinking;
- help you to manage time more effectively;
- help you to seek the common ground between you;
- help you to move beyond adversarial thinking.

Summarize often

- As you want to move on from one stage to the next, summarize where you think you have both got to and check that the other person agrees with you.
- To summarize means to reinterpret the other person's ideas in your own language.

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Use visuals

- It's said that people remember about 20 per cent of what they hear, and over 80 per cent of what they see.
 - **Recording your ideas on paper**
 - **Using metaphors**

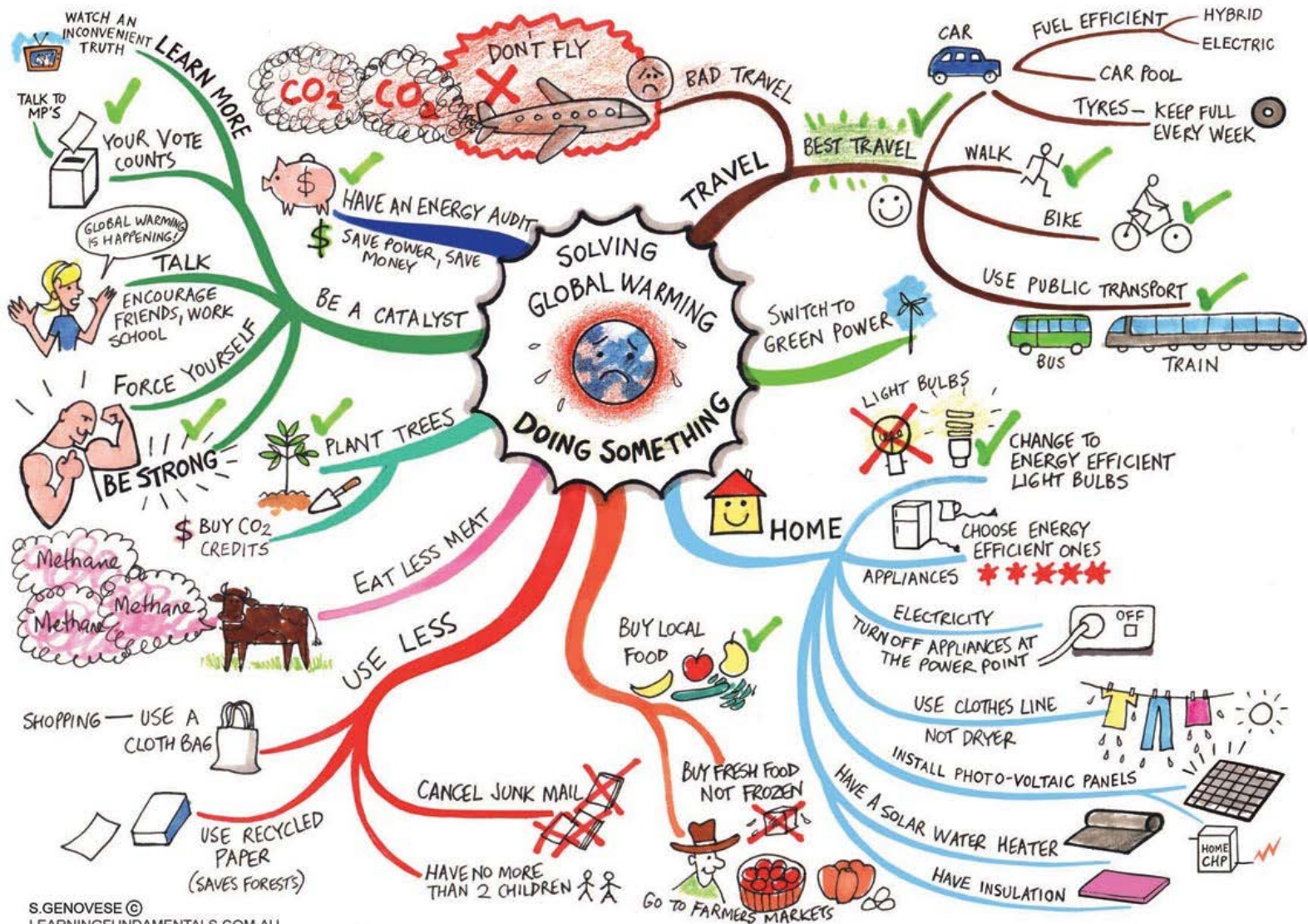
Use visuals

- **Recording your ideas on paper**
 - The patterns and pictures and diagrams and doodles that you scribble on a pad help you to listen, to summarize and to keep track of what you've covered.
 - Recording ideas in this way – on a pad or a flip chart – also helps to make conversations more democratic.
 - What is really needed, of course, is a technique that is flexible enough to follow the conversation wherever it might go: a technique that can accommodate diverse ideas while maintaining your focus on a clear objective.

Use visuals

- Mindmaps are powerful first-stage thinking tools. By emphasising the links between ideas, they encourage you to think more creatively and efficiently:

Mind map example



Use visuals

- To make a mindmap:
 - Put a visual image of your subject in the centre of a plain piece of paper.
 - Write down anything that comes to mind that connects to the central idea.
 - Write single words, in BLOCK CAPITALS, along lines radiating from the centre.
 - Main ideas will tend to gravitate to the centre of the map;
 - details will radiate towards the edge.
 - Every line must connect to at least one other line.
 - Use visual display: colour, pattern, highlights.
 - Identify the groups of ideas that you have created. If you wish, give each a heading and put the groups into numerical order.

Use visuals

- Mind maps force you to listen attentively, so that you can make meaningful connections; they help you to concentrate on what you are saying, rather than writing; and they store complicated information on one sheet of paper.

Use visuals

- Ex.
 - Draw a mind map regarding pollution
 - Draw a mind map for your future

Using metaphors

- Metaphors are images of ideas in concrete form. The word means 'transferring' or 'carrying over'.
- A metaphor carries your meaning from one thing to another.
- It enables your listener to see something in a new way, by picturing it as something else.
- Metaphors use the imagination to support and develop your ideas.

Using metaphors

- What's the problem like?
- If this were a different situation – a game of cricket, a medieval castle, a mission to Mars, a kindergarten – how would I deal with it?
- How would a different kind of person manage the issue: a gardener, a politician, an engineer, a hairdresser, an actor?
- What does this situation *feel* like?
- If this problem were an animal, what species of animal would it be?
- How could I describe what's going on as if it were in the human body?

Explore your answers to these questions and develop the images that spring to mind.

Using metaphors

- Ex.
 - Give a metaphor that is analogue to the following situations :
 - A person that works too hard but gains no progress